

AT ISHAM'S¹

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From Scribner's Magazine

IT was a place where men went who liked to talk of curious things. It was not, of course, advertised as that; there was no sign to the public saying as much. Indeed, the only sign of any sort said "Wines, Ales, and Liquors," just below the name "Isham." But, nevertheless, that is what it distinctively was—a place where men went who liked to talk of curious things.

It was a curious place to look at, too, in a way—the wrong way. It was a three-story house among houses fifteen, twenty, and thirty stories high; it was a house sixty years old, living usefully among houses, most of which were scarcely as many months old. But sixty years is no great age for a house in most places, and three stories is not out of the common. It is thirty stories that are extraordinary. In the right way Isham's was a very ordinary place to look at, in very curious surroundings—only it took a moment's thought to find it out.

Old Isham himself, though, would have been curious anywhere in the world. He was seventy years old, and he looked precocious. Perhaps having lived so long in an atmosphere of "wild surmise" had robbed him of the gift of wonderment, the last light of infancy to go out in the world, and so he was absolutely grown up. That is what he was, absolutely grown up. Looking into his face you could not imagine his ever being surprised, quite without a previous experience of the present. As one of his customers said, he could take the gayest dinner-party that ever was, and with a single glance of his faded blue

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eyes reduce it to a pile of dirty dishes and the bill. He was saturated with the gayety of thirty thousand dinners. He never condescended to the vulgarity of a dress suit, but always wore plain black with immaculate linen. So he would move in the evening, ponderously—for he must have weighed two hundred pounds—among the tables, listening imperturbably to praise and blame. Yes, chops were almost always properly broiled, beer had been flat from the beginning of the world—Lucullus with a dash of Cato.

Twinkle Sampson was his oldest patron. He was as old as Isham, and had been dining there once or twice a week ever since he was thirty; but he was the antithesis of Isham in appearance. He had the face of a very young child; it was all wonderment. The whole world was for him a wild surmise. His hobby was astronomy. He liked, as he said, to talk about the moon. Any of the heavenly bodies would interest him, but the moon was his own peculiar sphere. His knowledge was for the most laboriously gleaned, unassisted, from books; but twice in his life he had looked at the moon through a great telescope, and those two occasions were to Twinkle Sampson what one wedding and one funeral are to most men. He looked like a moon-lover, too, a pale, weak reflection of masculinity. The nearest he ever got to anger was when some ignorant person at Isham's threatened to divert the talk from his hobby when once he had dragged it thither.

"I know a man—," began one of these imprudently on one occasion.

"We don't care if you know a million men," interrupted Twinkle. "We want to talk about the moon."

And he sat for five minutes thereafter, blinking at the interloper like an exasperated white-haired owl. Even in that outburst, though, he characteristically took refuge in the plural.

Such little "flare-ups" were very, very frequent at Isham's. Indeed, they were inevitable, because there people talked of what they had thought about. It is the talk for talk's sake that is only a string of wearying agreements; the drunkard over a bar, a *débutante* at a dinner-table, a statesman among his constituents. Talk at

Isham's was intelligently sharp, interrupted, disputative. And, in any case, Savelle would have made it so. He was eaten up by the zeal of his cause, which was Christianity and capitalism. Capitalism, he preached, was founded on Christianity, was a development and an inevitable development of the social implication of the Gospels. It was a curious plea; it had the power of exasperating human beings otherwise kindly and meditative, such as chiefly affected Isham's, to something like fury when Savelle eloquently expounded it. He called it Christian economics. He argued that just as Christianity was developing the social relations of human beings to one of pure love, so it was developing also their economical relations to one of pure trust. The two developments had gone on side by side throughout the Christian era, from the days when merchants hauled ponderous "talents of silver" about with them in their trading, until now, when one could control all the wealth of the world by the tapping of a telegraph key. And not only was their growth thus synchronous, but each was the exactest exponent of the other; it was only in Christian countries, he explained, that the capitalistic system was to be found at all, and in the quasi-heathen it was invariably established in exact proportion with the spread of Christian ethics. He was full, too, of frequent instances and recondite dates, such as the invention of the bill of exchange by the Hebrews, and the advice of Jesus to his Apostles anent carrying money about with them. There were only two crimes in Christian economics, just as in the ethics; dishonesty, which he claimed was the commercial form of the sin against the Holy Ghost, and bankruptcy, or the refusal of trust, which was simply a denial of the economic implication of the teaching of love one another. Socialism, of course, was merely a new, subtle sacrilege, and Marx the newest incarnation of anti-Christ. His faith or fanaticism would always burn its fiercest in talking of these specific instances. Twinkle Sampson would sit blinking astigmatically at him for an hour in silence when he preached so. He was the only man of them all whom Twinkle Sampson never interrupted, never tried to drag away to the moon.

It was only an occasional horrified Christian or exasperated Socialist who ever diverted him, and then he would descend to embittering personalities with disconcerting quickness. He was of French descent, Gascon, a tall, fair, pale man, and had the racial instinct for combat. In the daytime he was the Wall Street reporter for one of the evening dailies, and people who knew him down there said he went about his work in that district like a pious pilgrim in Judea. But what you did daytimes never mattered at Isham's. It was what you could say evenings after dinner, in the back of the dining-room beside the bar, that counted, and there Savelle, next to Twinkle, was the best listened-to man in Isham's.

And, measured by that scale, little Norvel was his farthest neighbor. He was the least listened-to man, because he rarely spoke, and the best listener. Indeed, he was the only genuine listener. The others listened only under *force majeure*. He, on the contrary, would dine sparsely, for he was very poor, apparently, and sit smoking all evening until ten o'clock, and go away without ever speaking to any one, except the waiter who served, and a "Good evening" and "Good night" to Mr. Isham himself. His prestige was due solely to one effort. He had propounded a query which Isham's had discussed more than any other ever raised there, more than Twinkle's lunar hypotheses, or Savelle's Christian economics, and which had never been settled. It was the one common topic among them. Other subjects owed their existence and prosperity to the protection and loyalty of one man, but little Norvel, having put his afoot, retired into silence and cigar smoke, and left its life to the care of others. He had injected the conundrum into a conversation of Twinkle Sampson's about the inhabitants of Mars, in whose existence Twinkle Sampson not only believed, but took a far deeper interest than in those of his fellow earthmen.

"If," little Norvel began, "if Mars is inhabited by a race so similar to ourselves — if —"

"Well, well, Mr. Norvel," Twinkle Sampson interrupted, "that is fairly well conceded, I think. If — what?"

"If," continued little Norvel tranquilly, "if it is so, what means of communication between us is there that is so unmistakably of *human origin* that a sight of it, or a sound from it, would immediately convince them of our relationship?"

It had seemed, when the quiet little man first spoke, as if it was a question easily brushed aside; but a little discussion, genuine Ishamic, soon proved it to have greater weight. Norvel sat aside, contributing nothing then or ever thereafter. Indeed, the only result the question had, or seemed to have, for him was the winning by it of the deep affection of Twinkle Sampson.

The early discussion of the matter eliminated all possibilities of the sense of hearing. That one of the five senses had to be discarded from the possibilities of communication. There is no sound which humanity can create which nature, in some other form, cannot perfectly imitate. Except laughter? That suggestion was Savelle's. But it was not successful, though he defended himself with his own peculiar fervor. It appealed to the intense emotionalism of the man, that idea of the ultimate expression of humanity being laughter. He took up its defense as recklessly as his school of economics, and with something of the same breadth of vision and indefinite reasoning. Laughter was, he claimed, beyond the narrow limits of the question discussed, that very thing, the ultimate expression of humanity. Man was distinctively not, as he has been defined, the unfeathered biped, not the tool-using animal; he was the animal who laughs, and in proof he instanced the great poet. When he wished to imbue men with his own immense pessimism that the wrath of the Zeus was not the mysterious working of nature but the malignity of men, he made that terrible phrase, the most terrible ever spoken, "The laughter of the gods."

"Think of it yourselves," he demanded. "Put it into your own words. The laughter of God!" He was standing up then in the heat of his pleading. "What that's divine is left then? He can only be a man, a fearful superman."

But they beat down the orator with instances of gur-

gling brooks and hyenas. He strove Homerically with his attackers, thundering his defense of his vision until old Isham had to come up to the table and look at them all with his faded blue eyes and precocious face of seventy years. But though he failed of conviction his argument did just what he said; it put the question outside the "narrow limits" Norvel had laid it in. Savelle always did that with every question. After he had spoken the phrase they all remembered was his—the ultimate expression of humanity. It was by such phrases, such ideas, Isham's lived, as a place to which talk-hungry people learned to go.

Old Sampson, who always listened to Savelle, though he deplored his tendency "to wander in his talk," away from the moon and kindred subjects, took a new lease of life from that night. At last a day had come when people really liked to talk about the moon, or Mars, which was almost as good. He became a mental manufacturer of objects of origin so exclusively human that once they were conveyed to Mars, once that difficulty overcome, would produce instant understanding. Almost nightly he would turn up with a new one, and invariably some one would overthrow his hopes by suggesting a *natural*, in distinction to his *human*, phenomenon. He would always feebly defend his invention, and then fall silent—apparently intent upon a new one.

It was Philbin, the novelist, whose hobby was "Welt-politik," and who revelled in prophecies those days of a European cataclysm, who put him, as it were, finally out of this particular misery.

"It seems to me," complained Twinkle, in his plaintive voice, blinking almost tearfully at the table-cloth, "as if nature imitates everything."

"Twinkle," said Philbin, who was sitting next to him, "lend me your ears. I want 'to whisper into their furry depths.' Have you ever thought of going yourself?"

Twinkle, lifting his eyes to the other's face, blinked and shook his head.

Savelle was the only man who did not laugh. He never laughed either at Sampson or Philbin. "Don't you see," he cried sharply, in his eager idea-driven way, "don't

you see what the man has discovered? Your ears will need cropping soon. '*Nature imitates everything!*' That is, he has found, he has perceived, he is establishing by his own experiments that man, after all his effort and his boasting, after all his science and learning, which has made a joke of the teaching of Jesus and the poetry of Milton, that this *creature* itself has in turn *created* nothing. That man, after all, has only, can only, imitate nature."

He let fall his fist on the table, looking around at his listeners. He always had listeners at Isham's, and perhaps nowhere else in New York. For the moment he had forgotten his tiff with Philbin, had forgotten Philbin himself, and was all for rushing ahead on his idea-driven course to some unimaginable distance. But Philbin's vanity never forgot slights. It was not the words—he gave and took sharper every day of his life—but the manner in which he was thrown aside as an unnoticeable obstruction in the other's path of thought, the rush past him of the faster mind that mortified him. He knew Savelle, knew him better than any one in the room did, for that was his business, and he knew how fast he was going and how sharp he would fall, and then, like a mischievous little boy, with his foot, he stuck out his tongue and tripped him.

"That's contrary to every teaching of Christ you ever raved about," he said quickly.

Savelle did come down with rather a crash. Even his defenders admitted that much. But then he had been going very fast. Moreover, he was a man who habitually used too many words. He used too many to Philbin—a great deal too many. Philbin's faults were almost all on the outside, and even through the casual communion of Isham's he had made them pretty plain to every man there. He was vain, slightly arrogant, over-given to sneering. Savelle, in his defense of his position, managed to comment briefly upon each quality, and he put into the personalities the same vigor that he used to defend his theory of the universe. At the very best he showed a lamentable lack of proportion. At the worst he was vulgarly offensive.

That is the danger of such talk as men plunged into at Isham's; it lacks proportion. Personalities and universalities get all mixed up, and sometimes it takes long patience and a good deal of humor to straighten out the tangle. Philbin and Savelle were in just such a tangle over little Norvel's query. And neither of them had patience and Savelle had no grain of humor. If he had, he could not have come down from a discussion of his theory of the universe to criticism of Philbin's personality. The matter was quite hopeless. The tangle only grew tighter until there was only one way of ending it. Philbin took it. He was a little man, and very nervous, and when he stood up his finger-tips just touched the table, and he was trembling so they played a tattoo on the table-cloth. Then he bowed and went out.

He had behaved the better of the two, but every one was glad to see him go—except old Sampson, to whom anything like ill-feeling gave genuine pain. He liked a placid world in which one could babble in amity about the moon. But to the rest Philbin was a bore. His Welt-politik was uninteresting. His European cataclysm was a tale told by an idiot, full enough of learning, but signifying little or nothing. One could imagine baseball games on Mars, and make the matter realistic; but Philbin's imaginings dealt in palpable absurdities. Even at Isham's talk had limitations. Philbin had been a war correspondent in the Balkans, and they thought it had upset his mind.

Savelle affected to ignore his going away, and went on with his expounding of Twinkle Sampson's discovery—so he was pleased to call it. He ridiculed Philbin's criticism more fiercely than before. He, Sampson, had given a marvellously stimulating example, Savelle said, of what religious thought meant, that it was not in man to create, only in God. All that was human was imitation, even as man himself was God's image. In truth, Philbin's attack had stimulated him, and he talked that night better than he had ever talked. He felt that he had come off a second best in the encounter, and he determined to wipe out the remembrance from the memory of his hearers. Poor old Twinkle, hearing himself eulogized for the first time

in his life, probably, sat in silence, winking almost tearfully, too amazed to be pleased.

And always after he made a point of emphasizing this theory of his—or of Sampson's—as he called it. It became the rival in this talk of Christian economics. He did so without argument, for Philbin did not come back. A Futurist painter, who had found out Isham's purely by accident, gradually took his place. At Isham's places were always taken gradually. To make up for it they were generally taken for a very long time. Philbin's was the first defection, in fact, since Twinkle's low-toned monologues about the moon, with old Isham for the only listener, in the corner by the fireplace, had started it all eleven years ago. Philbin, too, had never been in very good standing; his trick of sarcasm hurt too many sensibilities. And then he was agnostic in everything, and Isham's collectively believed in almost everything. Every man of them, except the Futurist painter who took his place and had scarcely known him, had some little hurt somewhere to remember him by, and so, of course, wanted to forget him.

They had almost succeeded, too, when suddenly that happened which brought his name up in all thoughts, the war. That night, the night when all rumors and surmises were solidified into the single, soul-stunning fact, nobody mentioned his name, though each knew the others were thinking of it. It seemed uncivil when they had each heard the rest make such fun of his theories. But after a few days some bolder soul broke the spell.

"Philbin—do you remember, he always prophesied it?"

But that was all, and Savelle sat silent even then.

In truth, the war changed Isham's. Of course, it changed somehow almost everything in the world, but it changed Isham's peculiarly. Before it had been a place where people went to talk of curious things, and now the same people went there—Sampson and Savelle and little Norvel and the Futurist painter, and old Isham himself was unchanged, nothing could alter him, and they still talked of curious things, more curious things than they had ever imagined before, but Isham's had changed by

ceasing to be different, because everywhere people were talking of the same things. Talk at Isham's was just like talk on any street corner. In fact, the world had caught up with Isham's.

Then one night Philbin did come back. It was in the second year of the great war, and it had been nearly five since he had gone away after his tiff with Savelle. He did not come directly into the back room, as he had been used to do, but dined by himself at a small table in front. He sat there a long time after dinner over his coffee, with his back turned to his old place. Every one of them had seen him and recognized him, and talk that night was slow. Though he had spoken to none of them and turned his back to them, each knew somehow that he would speak and that he had come there especially to speak, and that he would say something important, and they sat nervously waiting.

At last he did come, pushing back his chair and walking slowly up the room. They noticed then how he had changed. He had grown very much older. He had been scarcely fifty when he had left, and now he looked and walked like an old man, and his dress, which had always been very neat and careful, showed an old man's carelessness. They all got up when he came and greeted him by name and with genuine cordiality. The little stings of five years since had vanished long ago. Savelle got up last and a little doubtfully, but it was Savelle he especially picked out.

"Ah, Savelle," and he put out his hand.

Then he sat down in his old place and ordered more coffee and talked for a while quietly to his right-hand neighbor, who was little Norvel. He said nothing of himself and very little of any subject, seeming distraught and very depressed. After a little, abruptly he took the conversation in his own hands.

"Gentlemen," he said, leaning forward with his hands folded on the cloth in front of him, "since I was here last I have had a very great sorrow. I have lost my son."

Then he fell silent again, and apparently not hearing any of the things that were said to him.

"He was killed," he began a second time, just as he

had begun the first, "in Flanders, six weeks ago. He was twenty-two years and four months old. Before he died they pinned this on him." He fumbled in his waistcoat, and picking out something threw it across the cloth over in front of Savelle. It was a little bronze cross known the world over, with two words on it, "For valor." "I sent them my son and they sent me back that," said Philbin.

It was the old Philbin voice—the same that had in turn galled each one of them.

"He went out in the night," he went on, "and pulled back to life two London fishmongers. Then he died—going back for a third fishmonger. There is some six inches in a London newspaper telling about it. That same paper gave a column and a half last week to a story I wrote. And they gave six inches to my son. That's queer, too, is n't it?"

Nobody answered him. They were all afraid to—his tone was too bitter. No one was quite sure what he would say.

"We used to talk here years ago," he went on presently, "about curious things. I think this curious enough to talk about. They gave a 'stick' to the death of my son and a column to the birth of my book. Savelle, you are a newspaper man, tell us about it?"

Savelle was looking at him with his eyes blazing, and he answered not a word.

"I suppose it's logical," said Philbin. "Any man may have a son. But I have written twenty books and had only one son."

The only answer came from quite an unexpected quarter. It was little Norvel, who was sitting at Philbin's elbow.

"Did you say, sir," he asked, "that he went back three times?"

"Yes, Mr. Norvel, three times—three fishmongers."

The man's sneers would have been disgusting if they had not been so plainly aimed at himself first. As it was, they were almost terrible.

"Whether the three fishmongers lived or died," he went on, "I don't know. The six inches neglected to

state. Want of space, possibly. You are a newspaper man, Savelle, perhaps you can explain."

"I wish you would explain this, Mr. Savelle," said little Norvel.

"What?" said Savelle.

"What part of nature Mr. Philbin was imitating when he went back?"

All the pent-up intensity of Savelle's being rushed out in his answer: "I am maliciously misrepresented. There is no human element in such action. It is the divine phenomenon of Calvary."

"Savelle," put in Philbin, "when my son was alive he was a man. I believe, too, he died like a man. I prefer that to an imitation of anything — even God."

The width of the table was between the two men, and the whole meaning of the universe. Their antagonism was irreconcilable. In that instant it had recovered all its bitterness of five years before. Time could do nothing. Not even chance could. It was literally immutable, the only thing in the world neither of those great forces can effect.

But the only pitiful part of it was, Sampson sitting between them, turning now to one, now to the other, with dim sight and faulty hearing, and wanting of either merely something human.